

## **DIVORCING FOOD AND AGRICULTURE: TOWARDS AN AGENDA FOR URBAN FOOD SECURITY RESEARCH**

**Prof Jonathan Crush, Balsillie School of International Affairs**

*“In many cities in developing countries, hunger and malnutrition are common amongst the poor, even when food is relatively abundant. Over the past two decades, a considerable literature has accumulated on the problems associated with rapid urbanization in developing countries – a literature that for the most part has neglected the important dimension of urban food systems and how these link production and consumption networks at local, regional and global levels” (Smith, 1998)*

### **Summary**

In 1998, building on a decade of pathbreaking research on Harare, David W Smith laid out a global agenda for urban food security research, identifying a number of gaps in the literature and accompanying research priorities. Smith, who passed away at a relatively young age in 2000, could not have reckoned with the difficulties and challenges of realising this agenda in a world in which food security had become (and continues to be) synonymous with food production, was seen as a problem mainly affecting rural populations, and was largely ignored in the global urbanization and development agenda (Crush and Frayne, 2011). As Smith noted “the urban simply does not feature as part of the food security crisis, either as cause or consequence.” Regrettably, nearly 20 years later, this is still an accurate prognosis.

The major obstacle to advancing research and policy-making on urban food security since Smith wrote has been the conflation of agriculture and food security. As a result, massive resources have been directed at “rural development” and smallholder agriculture in Africa, notably through the rich programmes and priorities of organizations such as the World Bank, AGRA (the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa), FANRPAN (the Food, Agriculture and Natural Resources Policy Analysis Network), IFAD (International Fund for Agricultural Development), IFPRI (International Food Policy Research Institute), the CFS (Committee on World Food Security) and, until the launch of its city-region project, the FAO.

Donors focused on addressing food insecurity in Africa have also directed their funding almost exclusively towards initiatives and projects related to food production by the continent’s small farmers. A case in point is the \$125million CIFS RF (Canadian International Food Security Research Fund (implemented by IDRC) which has funded 39 “research” projects which are apparently “improving food and nutritional security for men and women smallholder farmers.” Projects funded in Africa include (a) using radio programs, comics, text messages, social media, point-of-sale information materials, and field days to encourage farmers to adopt new varieties of legume seeds; (b) producing more yoghurt with freeze-dried bacteria and (c) helping cocoa farmers in West Africa to fight Lethal Yellowing disease. The conflation of agriculture with food security is also evident in many national food security plans which focus almost exclusively on boosting food production.

One of the key elements of the international food security discourse is the relegation of urban populations to the role of markets for commercializing small farmers. A corrective to the absence or diminution of “the urban” might have been forthcoming from the parallel research and policy world focused on the challenges of urbanization in the Global South. However, food insecurity has been notably absent from UNHABITAT’s brief. More recently, the Sustainable Development Goals have

reproduced the narrative that food security is an agricultural issue and, as SDG 11 makes clear, not a target in making cities “inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable” (Crush and Haysom, 2016). The Habitat III New Urban Agenda may be step in the right direction but getting a holistic vision of urban food security into the agenda was reportedly a significant challenge.

The hegemony of agriculture-centrism is also seen in three additional areas. First, there is a recurrent anti-urbanism in much food security discourse. There is a persistent tendency to contrast rural and urban populations and argue that the former are significantly poorer and more food insecure than the latter. Another element is a highly negative view of urbanization and an argument that its “root causes” can be mitigated through “rural development.” Urbanist Potts’ argument that rates of urbanization in Africa are highly exaggerated have been received with considerable enthusiasm therefore. Second, there is the argument that urbanites are small farmers too and that urban agriculture is a panacea in the cities. Proponents of UA, it must be said, do have an interest in the food insecurity of burgeoning urban populations but the proposed solution (“cities feeding themselves” in the words of one IDRC volume) is contentious when the vast majority of urban-dwellers purchase virtually all of their food. Third, over the last decade there has been increasing recognition that food security is not just about the quantity of food produced but the quality of food consumed. Organizations such as IFPRI, GAIN (the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition) and the SUN (Scaling Up Nutrition) Movement have been to the fore in pressing for a focus on the nutritional dimensions of food insecurity. However, to date, nutrition has been subsumed by agriculture-centrism and the call for a “nutrition-sensitive agriculture” (Janeicke and Virchow, 2013).

Against the backdrop of this hegemonic research and policy environment, the challenges of effecting divorce between food and agriculture and centring urban food security as a critical research and policy issue have been considerable. This paper/presentation discusses some of the opportunities and challenges using the experience of the African Food Security Urban Network (AFSUN) as a case study.

First, Swilling (2016) has recently called AFSUN a “game-changer” whose main significance is “that it generates new research that systematically addresses issues that are not addressed at policy and urban planning levels. It represents a socially innovative way of generating agenda-setting, research-based narratives that are beginning to trigger policy-orientated system change.” Since 2008, AFSUN has certainly sought to advance the urban food security research agenda but for various reasons the platform it laid is more robust in some areas than others.

AFSUN itself has become a victim of the very environment and narrative it sought to contest. Before its untimely demise, AFSUN spawned several spin-off projects including CUP and CUP2 and the Hungry Cities Partnership which, in alliance with other projects and initiatives, can carry the urban food security research agenda forward. Second, it is worth reflecting on the challenges and lessons learned from the attempt to establish an Africa-wide urban-focused food security research programme in the context of the agriculture-centrism and anti-urban bias of the international food security agenda.

Finally, there is the question of what a specifically urban food security research agenda should look like (Battersby, 2013). Here it is useful to return to Smith (1998) and the knowledge gaps and research priorities he identified. These can be distilled into five major areas of focus:

- The links between urbanization and food systems;
- The forms and functioning of urban food systems;
- The nature, levels and drivers of food insecurity in the cities;
- The relationship between household food insecurity and food systems;
- The formal and informal food retail environment in the cities;

A great deal more research in each of these inter-connected areas would finally help to fulfil Smith's urban food security agenda of addressing "the important dimension of urban food systems and how these link production and consumption networks at local, regional and global levels."

## REFERENCES

Battersby, J. (2013). "Hungry Cities: A Critical Review of Urban Food Security Research in Sub-Saharan African Cities" *Geography Compass* 7: 452-63.

Crush, J. and Frayne, B. (2011). "Urban Food Security and the New International Food Security Agenda" *Development Southern Africa* 28: 527-544.

Crush, J. and Haysom, G. (2016). "Cities Without Food: What Targets Have the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Missed?" Presentation at Conference on Joining the SDGs: Urbanization and Food Security in the Global South, Waterloo.

Jaenicke, H. and Virchow, D. (2013). "Entry Points into a Nutrition-Sensitive Agriculture" *Food Security* 5: 679-92.

Swilling, M. (2016). "Africa's Game Changers and the Catalysts of Social and System Innovation" *Ecology and Society* 21(1):3